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ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES AND INSANITY

BY WHIDDEN GRAHAM

THE sentiment in favor of laws prohibiting the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages has been largely created by the wide-spread circulation of statements purporting to show that the use of intoxicating liquors is the chief factor in causing insanity, crime, poverty and disease. This idea finds expression in the statement, now being circulated in the press, that "the intemperate use of alcohol is filling our insane asylums, jails, poor houses and cemeteries." This assertion is generally accompanied by the further statement that prohibition of the liquor traffic materially reduces the number of insane persons, as compared with the number in non-prohibition territory.

To correct the mistaken impression created by the constant repetition of these assertions it is only necessary to examine the official records of the various States and the United States Census Reports, which show that instead of alcohol being the chief cause of insanity, it is one of the least of causes. Further disproof of the prohibitionist claims in regard to the relation of alcohol to insanity are found in the conclusions reached by eminent alienists and scientific students of the question, and State records showing that prohibition does not diminish insanity.

What are the facts? The number of insane persons admitted to hospitals in the United States in the year 1910, as reported by the Census Bureau, was 60,769. Of this total the number suffering from alcoholic psychoses was 6,122, or 10.7 per cent. The percentage of alcoholic insane varies considerably in the different States, but the average rate given above is approximately the same from year to year. This establishes the fact that instead of alcohol "fill-

ing our asylums" only a trifle more than ten per cent of the cases of insanity is ascribed to its use.

Following their assertions in regard to alcohol as the chief cause of insanity, the prohibitionists claim that by forbidding the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages the number of the insane would be greatly decreased. An examination of the statistics of the various States show nothing to support this claim. The latest figures on this subject, taken from the Census Reports for 1910, disprove this theory. They show, for instance, that wet Indiana had fewer alcoholic insane than dry Kansas. Wet Nebraska had the lowest rate in the Union. Dry Oklahoma had the highest rate, with the two exceptions of Colorado and Nevada. Maine, which has had prohibition longest, shows a higher rate than eleven wet States. In view of these facts it is evident that prohibition does not decrease insanity.

Still stronger proof of the failure of prohibition to diminish insanity is found in a comparison of the number of insane persons in Maine and Kansas, the two banner prohibition States, at different periods. In 1890 Maine had 92.6 insane per 100,000 population. In 1903 the percentage had increased to 125.3 per 100,000. In 1910 the percentage was 169.5, an increase in twenty years of eighty-three per cent.

The insanity rate in Kansas increased from 88.4 in 1890 to 165.6 in 1903, and to 172.2 in 1910, an increase of ninety-four per cent. These two States had prohibitory laws during the twenty year period referred to, and yet co-incident therewith was this very great increase in the number of the insane. Applying the logic of the prohibitionists, who say that the higher rate of insanity in certain license States is due to liquor drinking, the marked increase of insanity in Maine and Kansas must likewise have been due to prohibition. That policy was in force in those States for twenty years. The rate of insanity increased more than eighty per cent in Maine, and more than ninety per cent in Kansas. Therefore: prohibition is the cause of insanity!

In reply to this showing of the increase in insanity under prohibition, it may be answered that there has also been a marked increase in the number of insane in license States. True, but if liquor drinking is, as alleged, the principal cause of insanity, the rate of increase would always be much greater in the States where the sale of liquor is permitted.

That this is not the case the following instances will show. In 1890 the number of insane per 100,000 population in California, always a wet State, was 272.2. In 1910 the percentage was 279.8, an increase of only 2.7 per cent. In wet Rhode Island the percentage of insane in 1890 was 191.0 per 100,000. In 1910 the percentage had increased to 229.1, an increase of only 16.6 per cent. Oregon, another license State during the entire period 1890-1910, had in the former year 176.6 insane persons per 100,000. In 1910 the percentage was 232.6, an increase of thirty-two per cent. This comparatively small increase of insanity in license States, as contrasted with the much greater increase in prohibition States, proves beyond question that the use of alcohol is not the chief factor in causing insanity.

The fact that insanity has greatly increased in the two States that have had the longest experience under prohibition, disposes of the claim that prohibitory laws will diminish the number of the insane. There remains the question: to what extent is alcohol the actual cause of insanity even in the ten per cent of cases ascribed to it?

What is known as "alcoholic psychoses," is a disordered mental state popularly supposed to be due to the excessive use of alcohol. It has certain definite characteristics, and there is no question but that its existence is associated with alcohol drinking. There is, however, a serious doubt as to whether the excessive use of alcohol is the "cause" of the mental disorder, or merely a symptom of mental weakness which existed previous to the acquisition of the drink habit. This latter view is being taken by an increasing number of physicians who have given the subject careful study, and their conclusions are to the effect that as a rule the mental weakness which leads to excessive drinking antedates the alcoholism. This is the position maintained by Dr. Karl Pearson, the eminent English biologist, who has made an exhaustive study of the "Influence of Parental Alcoholism on the Physique and Ability of the Offspring." In his latest discussion of the subject Dr. Pearson says: "The abuse of alcohol is one of the stigmata of degeneracy. It is not the cause of degeneracy, but its product. As the production of degeneracy—whether in the form of mental defect, epilepsy or insanity—is checked, to that extent the abuse of alcohol will be checked."

Much the same view of the problem is taken by Dr.

Wilhelm Stocker, of Jena, Germany, who is recognized as one of the foremost authorities on alcoholic psychoses. In a book dealing with various phases of the question, published in 1910, he states that the abuse of alcohol is not the cause of mental defects and insanity, but it is to be considered itself as the outcome of a diseased mental condition. Dr. Stocker says:

In the majority of my cases the question is not, however, of simply psychically subnormal personalities, but of sick individuals in whom a definite basic, and further-to-be-diagnosed, illness could be traced. Thus the chronic alcoholism in their cases is to be regarded in the first instance as a symptom of a definite mental ailment.

Taking eighty-nine individual cases of extreme alcoholism Dr. Stocker found that in thirty-four cases the alcoholism was due to epilepsy, in twenty-seven cases to melancholic mania, in fourteen cases to dementia præcox, in nine cases to other psychoses, leaving only five cases in which the excessive alcoholism could not be traced to some definite mental defect. Thus in the eighty-nine cases of alcoholic insanity there were less than five per cent that could not be shown to be due to peculiar physical and mental conditions, of which the abuse of alcohol was merely a symptom, and not the cause.

Similar testimony is furnished by Dr. Irwin H. Neff, Superintendent of the Massachusetts State Hospital for Inebriates. In an address before the National Conference of Charities and Corrections, at the 1915 meeting at Baltimore, Dr. Neff said:

Statistical knowledge bearing on the subject overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that a considerable number of confirmed drunkards are mentally defective, ranging from mild emotional disturbance and judgment perversion, to well defined psychoses.

And again:

Inebriety is an expression of nervous weakness, the nervous weakness being inherited, a psycho-neurotic fault; founded on this weakness, manifestly a defect, is a habit we call drunkenness.

If drunkenness is the result of mental weakness, that weakness is necessarily the cause of alcoholic insanity.

Dr. R. W. Branthwaite, an English physician of high standing, in his "Report of the Inspector Under the Inebriates Acts" for the year 1908, says:

The more we see of habitual drunkards the more we are convinced that the real condition to be studied, the trouble we have to

fight, and the source of all the mischief, is a psycho-neurotic peculiarity of some sort; an inherent defect in mechanism, generally congenital, sometimes more or less acquired. Alcohol, far from being the chief cause of inebriety, is merely the medium which brings into prominence certain defects that might have remained hidden but for its exposing or developing influence.

That is: the excessive use of alcohol is simply a manifestation of a mental weakness that develops into insanity.

In the report of the "Committee of Fifty to Investigate the Liquor Problem" on the Physiological Aspects of the Liquor Problem, Dr. John S. Billings, a distinguished American physician, says:

In any cases where there is a tendency to psychic or nervous instability and abnormal action, either inherited or acquired, the excessive use of alcohol may act as the exciting cause, like a torch to inflammable material, but the same result may be produced with any excess creating a strain on the nervous system, and the alcohol would produce no effect upon a nervous system in normally good condition.

The most convincing proof that the real cause for the excessive use of liquor and alcoholic insanity is mental weakness, or some inherited psychic fault, is found in the indisputable fact that only an insignificant percentage of all those who drink liquors are afflicted with insanity. Careful investigations by the Committee of Fifty show that eighty per cent of the adult male population of this country use alcoholic beverages, and it is claimed by the prohibitionists that the percentage is even larger. Out of this total of more than 25,000,000 males, there are about 5,000 cases of alcoholic insanity annually, or less than one fiftieth of one per cent. If it were true that liquor drinking is the real cause of insanity, how does it happen that such an exceedingly small percentage of those who drink become insane? If the prohibition theory is correct, the moderate drinkers should in time all become excessive drinkers or drunkards, and the latter, in turn, develop alcoholic insanity. The fact that they do not proves that it is only the very small minority afflicted with mental weakness, or some other constitutional infirmity, who drink to such excess as to affect their already weakened minds. A cause must be universal in its application, and if 25,000,000 men can drink without injury, it is fair to assume that the very few who are injured must have something peculiar in their physical or mental makeup

that renders them specially liable to excessive drinking, and the insanity which accompanies it.

The word "cause" is so loosely used that its meaning is generally lost sight of. When men speak of the "cause" of anything they presumably mean that certain co-existences and sequences are necessarily associated. But through careless thinking the word "cause" is often used in connection with wholly unrelated facts. Correct principles of reasoning demand that in order to establish a cause it must be shown that a like cause always produces a like effect, and that there is an invariable and unvarying relation between the cause and the effect. Applying this rule to the question of alcohol as the cause of insanity, we find that millions of men drink liquor. Of these only a small percentage drinks to excess. Of all the men who drink less than one-fiftieth of one per cent develop alcoholic insanity. How can it be claimed that liquor drinking is the cause of insanity, when the alleged cause not only does not invariably produce the same effect, but in ninety-nine and nine-tenths cases produces no effect whatever?

The prevailing opinion of the medical profession that excessive drinking is due to an abnormal state of mind is thus stated in an editorial article in *The Medical Record* for August 5th, 1916:

The fundamental error in dealing with the problem of alcohol is the conception of it as a habit-forming drug, the abolition of which would mean the automatic regeneration of all inebriates. As a matter of fact, the inebriate is not normal and, deprived of his alcohol, would drift to some eleemosynary institution. This has been proved by the experience of prohibition States.

The same view is taken by Dr. William A. White, Superintendent Government Hospital for the Insane, Washington, D. C., in a paper, "Alcoholism, a Symptom," read before the Society for the Study of Inebriety at Washington, December, 1915, in which he says:

Is alcohol in these cases only a symptom of some underlying fundamental condition which has escaped our notice, simply because it is too subtle to be seen by casual observation or found by ordinary methods of inquiry? I think it is, and my attention was first attracted to this possibility many years ago. Some of you at least will remember the work of the English hereditarian, G. Archdall Reid, *Darwinism and Race Progress*, in which the author, who, I may remind you, has since written many able and learned works, undertook a statistical

study of the effects produced by prohibition, in several of our prohibition States, where prohibition statutes had been in operation for a considerable number of years. His conclusions were no less striking than unexpected at that time. It was to the effect that the statistics clearly indicated in these States, that as the consumption of alcohol had been diminished and as drunkenness had been lessened, the admission to the insane asylums and poor houses had progressively and correspondingly increased. If we do not instantly discard such a conclusion as this, and will stop for a moment and give it careful consideration, we must be struck by the probability of its truth, and by its important social significance. Such a conclusion can only mean that the alcoholic as such is a mental defective in some way, and that if his mental deficiency does not show as indulgence in alcohol, it will later show a frank mental disease, or as that type of deficiency which leads to pauperism.

This conclusion, I am convinced is a correct one, and I am reminded as I dictate these words of the occasion of a meeting of your Society here at Washington some two or three years ago in which I heard your President, a man grown old in this particular work, say in discussion, that he had never seen an inebriate who aside from his inebriety was a normal man.

WHIDDEN GRAHAM.